Suite smell of success

Microsoft has stopped shipping copies of its Office 2000 suite and the behemoth's newer and shinier XP package is being touted as the obvious replacement. But hang on, says Alistair Dabbs, you don't have to fly the Microsoft flag just because it's familiar

Almost everyone uses an office suite, but few of us make a conscious decision about which one. After all, just about every Windows PC comes with a preinstalled or bundled copy of an office suite, comprising a word processor, spreadsheet application, business graphics program and, often, a database package.

However, there are several reasons why you might want to invest in a new office suite. You may wish to upgrade from a basic collection to a more professional platform, or perhaps it's the opposite and you find that the office suite bundled with your PC is too large and slow. Alternatively, if you are about to buy a new PC, you may be considering a new set of software applications at the same time.

So should you go with the flow and buy one of Microsoft's Office XP suites or opt for one of the competitors from the likes of Corel, Lotus or Sun?

What's wrong with XP?

When Microsoft upgraded Office 2000 to XP the new suite won rave reviews, but its take-up has been slow. In a poll of *PC Advisor* readers last year, when prompted with the phrase 'I will be upgrading to Office XP…', half of the respondents answered 'Never'. A massive 40 percent of the remainder indicated an eventual upgrade was inevitable whether they wanted it or not – hardly displaying unbounded enthusiasm.

But it's tough luck: Microsoft has now withdrawn stocks of Office 2000, so if you want to stick with its offerings you have little choice. Much of this reluctance is down to upgrade fatigue – people get fed up with having to buy and learn new software when their existing programs work perfectly well. The poor economic conditions of last year were another factor. Businesses were keen to cut expenditure and, understandably, having upgraded in late 1999 amid Millennium bug fears, they were less keen to dole out again so soon.

Yet another issue is the relative complexity which Microsoft Office XP introduces and the extra system demands it makes. After all, the majority of users just want to type letters, calculate totals, organise information and show slides. For them a simpler and cheaper option might be more appropriate.

What are the alternatives?

Buying and using an office suite that isn't produced by Microsoft is a scary prospect. It's not just a matter of the retraining cost or fear of the unknown, but a very real and sensible concern about moving away from the undisputed market dominator. It's all a question of standards – in this case, the file formats, such as word.doc and excel.xls, that have become standards through Microsoft's market domination.

As a result, any move away from Microsoft Office products entails the adoption of an alternative which can open and save back to Microsoft's file formats, because that's what the rest of the world is using. Thankfully, all Microsoft's competitors have taken great pains to make sure this is possible, so you need only be concerned with the content and functionality of the alternative suites and, of course, how much money you can save.

Every office suite should include a word processor for creating text documents and a spreadsheet for working with calculations. Additionally, there ought to be a graphics package for putting together printed reports or creating onscreen presentations and a database program for maintaining and looking up information. Suites may also provide an email application, sometimes even a fax package. Beyond these, some include personal information utilities such as appointment calendars, contact managers and clip art browsers.

Let's investigate how each of the mainstream office offerings compares for functionality and value.

Suite dreams

Ability Office 2002

Imagine someone took Microsoft Office and shaved off the features you rarely used – you'd be left with Ability Office 2002. This suite is robust and usable, comprising the three essentials applications: word processer, spreadsheet and database. For good measure, a photo-editing program is thrown in and the whole thing costs under £50. Ability hasn't scrimped on useful features such as table editing in the word processor and print-to-fit in the spreadsheet. There are even SQL (structured query language) hooks that let you extract data from Microsoft Access databases. Office 97/2000 compatibility also comes as standard. For a supposed no-frills offering, you certainly get a lot for your money.

Corel WordPerfect Office 2002 Professional

About a decade ago, Corel bought WordPerfect and various items from Borland and offered them as one bundle. Corel has since grown leaner and meaner, tidying up the suite while offering value for money. The WordPerfect brand also carries enough weight to convince budget-conscious managers that it's not an untried alternative.

The main programs are versions 10.0 of WordPerfect, Quattro Pro, Paradox and the underrated Presentations. It also includes NaturallySpeaking voice-recognition software, which comes with a mic-and-earphone headset. PIM functions are handled by CorelCentral, which can

← Ability's Photopaint is a rare example of a photo-editing package bundled into an office suite – and it's a decent one at that, with layer editing and filter effects as standard

→ Corel Presentations – part of WordPerfect Office – is a highly functional and versatile alternative to Microsoft PowerPoint and is especially strong in multimedia support

Linux lovers

The crucial point in choosing an office suite for Linux is to find one that's properly compatible with your particular flavour of the operating system.

Users of K Desktop Environment will most likely opt for KOffice 1.1.1, which comprises KWord, KSpread, KPresenter, KChart, Kivio (flowchart creator), Kontour (drawing) and Kugar (business reporting). KWord and KSpread can exchange documents with their Microsoft Office 97 and 2000 equivalents, but KPresenter is restricted to PowerPoint 97 only.

Gnome Desktop users, on the other hand, should take a look at Gnome Office. Its applications include AbiWord, Gnumeric (spreadsheet), Galeon (web browser), Gimp (image editing), Dia (diagramming) and other components from graphics to project management.

For a tighter offering, try Anyware Office from VistaSource. Previously known as ApplixWare Office, this pack includes the simply titled applications Words, Spreadsheets, Graphics

(vector and bitmap), Presents and Mail. Support for Microsoft Office 97 and 2000 formats is provided.

Collaboration rather than commercialism is what the GNU-Linux world is all about. One Office competitor, Sun's StarOffice, has been available as open source code for the past 18 months. Gnome Office is also being worked into StarOffice and compatibility with Microsoft Office XP is seen as a priority. But if you want the shrinkwrapped, spoon-feeding of a Windows-style suite, consider NeTraverse Win4Lin 3.0, a utility which lets you run Windows programs, such as Office XP, under Linux.
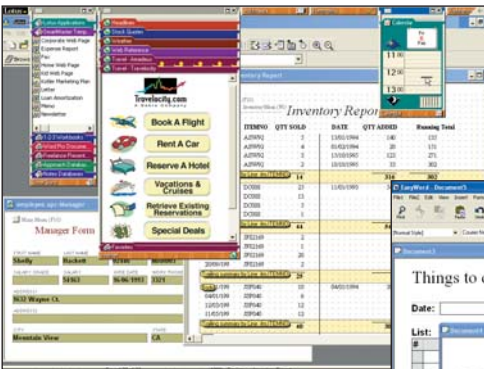
- Anyware Office 2.2 **www.vistasource.com; price: $99**
- Gnome Office **www.gnome.org; price: free**
- KOffice 1.1.1 **www.koffice.org; price: free**
- NeTraverse Win4Lin 3.0 **www.netraverse.com; price: $89.99**
- OpenOffice organisation **www.openoffice.org**
- Sun StarOffice 5.2 **www.staroffice.com; price: free**

deal with email and collaborative scheduling and includes drivers for Palm OS handheld PCs. Unfortunately, as with most of the competition, the suite's Microsoft support stops at Office 2000 (XP support will come later).

WordPerfect Office is also available in a Standard edition, which costs about £100 less but omits Paradox. We feel that a serious office suite should include a database package.
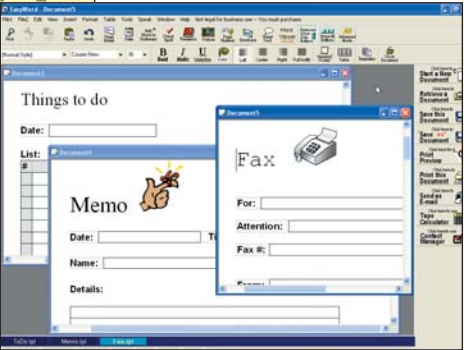
E-press EasyOffice Premium

If you're looking for an easy-to-use suite, EasyOffice Premium is certainly worth a try. This E-press offering includes a decent word processor, spreadsheet, presentation package (with full animation effects), contact manager, personal accounts program, speaking proofreader and even a zip compression utility. EasyOffice's interface employs big buttons

with explicit titles – ideal for PC beginners. Individuals can download and use EasyOffice free of charge; business users, on the other hand, must pay for the privilege.

Lotus SmartSuite Millennium 9.7

SmartSuite used to be the most common preinstalled office suite before Microsoft swallowed up the market at the end of the 1990s, and it remains a popular package. Part of its continued popularity lies in Lotus' refusal to issue major upgrades simply for the sake of it.

SmartSuite Millennium 9.7 is a generous package, comprising the multi-award-winning Word Pro and the one-time market-leading spreadsheet, Lotus 1-2-3, along with Approach (database application) and another award winner, Freelance Graphics. You're treated to IBM's voice-recognition software ViaVoice, the popular old-timer PIM (personal information manager) utility Lotus Organizer, an intranet publishing package and a Lotus Notes email client. Also installed is SmartCenter, an information manager that puts a set of tabbed 'drawers' along the top edge of your screen to hold snippets of information, web pages and so on.

Version 9.0 of Lotus SmartSuite was released several years ago, with each upgrade adding compatibility extras and improved details such as dictionaries and bug fixes. It's worth noting that the latest edition is the only office suite alternative to include import and export filters for Office XP files. This could be the feature that swings your choice.

← Lotus SmartCenter (featured in SmartSuite Millennium) lets you manage data in drop-down tabbed drawers, including live websites

→ EasyOffice's EasyWord application can be used as a text editor, but it comes with a nice line in document templates. Note also the friendly interface with full explanatory labels on the command buttons

Microsoft Office XP Professional

Although it's easy to write off Office XP as Microsoft's latest cash cow, we have to admit the suite is very good. You don't need Windows XP to run it although, with XP, the programs will run significantly faster than those in Office 2000. It comprises the 2002 editions of Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access and Outlook, with a clean and interactive interface.

Microsoft is so sure of the suite's intuitiveness that it now lets you get rid of its annoying animated help characters. However, Office XP swings to the other extreme by not installing the full Help system by default. Instead, you are presented with an extra pane in your working window from time to time, prompting you with likely options of what you might be wanting to do via equally irritating speech bubbles.

Office XP is also available in a budget Standard edition. However, this lacks the Access database, which is an essential application if you run a business.

Microsoft Works Suite 2002

At one time, 'works' suites were as popular as office suites. They followed the same principle – bundling essential work-oriented programs in one box – but were targeted at individuals and small businesses. PC vendors, however, tended to sell new machines with free or cut-price copies of one of the big-name office suite alternatives. This meant that most of the ultra-budget works packages dried up.

By the late 1990s, only ClarisWorks and Microsoft Works were left. When Apple

Features comparison

Suite	Ability Office 2002	Corel WordPerfect Office 2002 Professional	E-press EasyOffice Premium	Lotus SmartSuite Millennium Edition 9.7	Microsoft Office XP Professional	Microsoft Works Suite 2002	Sun StarOffice 5.2
Contact	020 7231 6310	0800 581 028	+1 905 771 1322	0870 600 6123	0870 601 0100	0870 601 0100	0800 731 3658
Website	www.ability.com	www.wordperfect.com	www.e-press.com	www.lotus.com/smartsuite	www.microsoft.com/uk/office	www.microsoft.com/uk/homepc/works2002	www.sun.co.uk/staroffice
Typical price	£49.95	£299	$39.95	£299	£439	£99	free
Minimum processor	any Pentium	166MHz Pentium	100MHz Pentium	150MHz Pentium	133MHz Pentium	200MHz Pentium	any Pentium
Minimum RAM	32MB	16MB	16MB	16MB	32MB	64MB	32MB
Typical disk space	25MB	340MB	50MB	268MB	245MB	1.45GB	110MB
Word processor	Write	WordPerfect 10.0	EasyWord, SimpleWord	Word Pro	Word 2002	Word 2002	Writer
Spreadsheet	Spreadsheet	Quattro Pro 10.0	EasySpreadsheet	Lotus 1-2-3	Excel 2002	Works 6.0	Calc
Graphics	Photopaint	Presentations 10.0	EasyPresentation	Freelance Graphics	PowerPoint 2002	Picture It Photo Studio	Impress, Draw
Database	Database	Paradox 10.0	no	Approach	Access 2002	Works 6.0	Base
Email	no	CorelCentral 10.0	no	Lotus Notes	Outlook 2002	Outlook Express	Mail, Discussion
Internet	no	no	no	SmartCenter, FastSite	Internet Explorer	Internet Explorer	Internet browser
Personal information manager	no	CorelCentral 10.0	contact manager	Lotus Organizer	Outlook 2002	calendar, address book	scheduler
Spellchecker	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Languages	no	30	11	48	202	200+	20
Thesaurus	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Other software	no	Dragon NaturallySpeaking, Quick View Plus, font manager	EasyZip, EasySpeaker, Easy BookKeeper, calculator	ScreenCam, IBM ViaVoice	none	Money 2002, Encarta 2002	Math, Stylist, Navigator, Beamer, Content
Application scripting	VBScript, JavaScript	Visual Basic for Applications	no	LotusScript	Visual Basic for Applications	no	no (but imported VBA scripts still work)
Windows versions	95, 98, Me, NT, 2000, XP	95, 98, Me, NT, 2000, XP	95, 98, Me, NT, 2000, XP	98, Me, NT, 2000, XP	98, Me, NT, 2000, XP	98, Me, 2000, XP	95, 98, Me, NT, 2000

Perfect for PDAs

PDAs (personal digital assistants) were originally designed to provide basic information functions, such as contact books, diaries, to-do lists and maybe the odd scribbled note. This all changed when Psion began packing core office applications into its PDAs, followed soon after by Microsoft with its Windows CE and Pocket PC platforms.

Pocket PC palmtops from the likes of Casio, Compaq and HP have a clear advantage because their office programs are effectively smaller versions of Microsoft Office. Within certain limits, file exchange compatibility with Office XP on the desktop is all but guaranteed.

The only serious competitor to Pocket PC is the Palm OS, which drives Palm and Handspring PDAs. No two operating systems could be more unlike: Pocket PC is built for style and power, while Palm OS is built for miniaturisation and efficiency. Many third-party developers have produced office programs for the Palm OS over the years. However, the product which few business users can do without is DataViz's Documents To Go. This set of utilities lets you view Word, Excel and PowerPoint documents on your Palm or Handspring, edit them and create new ones for synching back to the desktop.

A handy extra is FileMaker Mobile, which lets you work with FileMaker databases on your Palm OS device.

• FileMaker Mobile www.filemaker.co.uk; price: £39.95
• DataViz Documents To Go 4.0 www.dataviz.com; price: £65

pulled the former back under its wing and relaunched it as the Mac-only AppleWorks, Microsoft ended up owning the whole market by default.

Microsoft currently has two Works products available. The core pack is Works 6.0, which includes a word processor, spreadsheet, database, calendar, address book and Works Portfolio. However, this is most commonly bundled into the Works 2002 collection, which additionally comes with a full copy of Word 2002, Money 2002, Picture It Photo Studio, AutoRoute 2002 and Encarta 2002.
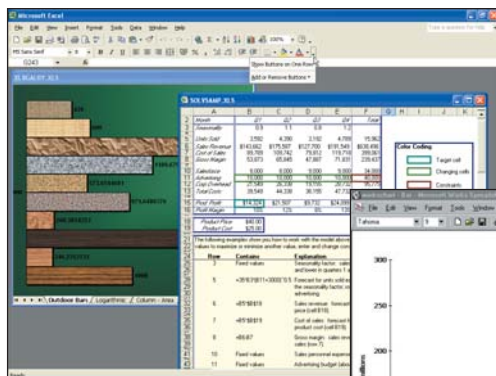
The inclusion of Word 2002 is important because Works programs do not share the same file format as Microsoft Office applications. For this reason, Works 2002 is best reserved for individuals rather than those who need to share documents with colleagues who are likely to be running a full office suite.

Sun StarOffice 5.2

If Microsoft can promote its own internet software for free, says Sun, we're going to give away our office suite as well. StarOffice is a powerful set of programs, including a word processor, spreadsheet, presentations package, database program, drawing software, collaborative email and scheduling functions.

Experienced PC users will find the programs quick to pick up, although Sun's approach can be confusing, as it involves locking the entire suite within its own StarOffice Desktop window. If you like to work with different programs outside your office suite, this will drive you crazy. On the other hand, many business users might be happy to maximise the window to fill the screen, as clever file navigator functions let you use StarOffice as a complete, surrogate PC desktop anyway. You can even handle web browsing and email from within the suite and these are given robust support.

StarOffice is available in several languages and you can spellcheck up to 20 in any one document. Cross-platform support is good, too, since the suite is available for Solaris and Linux platforms as well as Windows. The 'free' status applies to users without qualification, as long as you download it across the web. You can buy the suite on CD for £25 and optionally pay for support services, but that's up to you. ■

← Excel 2002 – which is included in Office XP – is more than a number crunching package: it's also an impressive data presentation program with extensive graphics capability

↑ Works Suite 2002's main package is Works 6.0, which includes an easy-to-use spreadsheet application

← The permanent location field at the top of the StarOffice desktop lets you open websites using the built-in browser while working on other applications in the suite

ON THE COVER DISC Load up this month's cover disc for a fully working, freeware version of E-press EasyOffice